

Independent Press Standards Organisation's (IPSO) Written Submission to the Political Polling and Digital Media Consultation

IPSO

1. The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) is the independent regulator for the newspaper and magazine industry in the UK. We hold newspapers and magazines to account for their actions, protect individual rights, uphold high standards of journalism and help to maintain freedom of expression for the press. We currently regulate over 1500 print titles and 1100 online titles, comprising 95% of the national daily newspapers by circulation and the majority of magazines, local and regional newspapers in the UK.
2. IPSO provides a free-to-use complaints service regarding possible breaches of the [Editors' Code of Practice](#).¹ Where resolution between the parties is not possible, IPSO adjudicates on complaints. Adjudications are made by IPSO's Complaints Committee, a panel of twelve with expertise in journalism and a lay majority. If a complaint is upheld, the Committee can require publications to publish a correction or its adjudication. The Committee also has the power to determine the nature, extent and placement of these corrections and adjudications. In addition to the Committee's work, IPSO monitors complaints for thematic issues (such as the misrepresentation of statistics) and works with publishers to improve their compliance with the Code.
3. Our work gives us a unique understanding of press standards and public concerns relating to press coverage of polling. Through the Committee's rulings we have developed a body of thinking about how polling can be reported in a way that is both accurate and not misleading, but can also be accessible to a general audience. We have therefore focussed on questions which relate to these issues.

Submission

Question 11: Does the media report on opinion polls appropriately? What steps could be taken to improve how the media reports the results of political opinion polls? For example, should standards be set in relation to the reporting of political opinion polls, or should a code of conduct be introduced?

The Editors' Code of Practice:

4. Under the terms of the Code, publishers are entitled to be partisan, to campaign and to present opinion. This is crucial to free speech, but can lead to disputes concerning accuracy. These disputes do not, in and of themselves, suggest that polling data is being reported inappropriately, but may simply be the result of healthy political debate. Inaccuracies can occur due to an error in the way the data is presented, or because of an honest but inaccurate interpretation of the polling results. IPSO is able to determine whether or not an article contains such inaccuracies and to what extent readers would be misled by them. We do this using Clause 1 of the Editors' Code of Practice.

¹ We also help members of the public with unwanted press attention or harassment concerns, provide advice on the Code, run a Journalists' Whistleblowing Hotline, monitor on-going compliance with the Code, and produce guidance on the reporting of certain topics (such as transgender issues). We operate a pilot arbitration scheme to provide alternative dispute resolution for legal claims against the press.

5. Clause 1 imposes the following requirements:

“i) The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by the text.

ii) A significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distortion must be corrected, promptly and with due prominence, and — where appropriate — an apology published. In cases involving IPSO, due prominence should be as required by the regulator.

iii) A fair opportunity to reply to significant inaccuracies should be given, when reasonably called for.

iv) The Press, while free to editorialise and campaign, must distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact. [...]”

6. The Code provides a single source of standards which apply to journalism in general, covering reports concerning a wide variety of issues. The clauses of the Code are designed to be accessible, and in this way provide a clear set of standards that can form the basis of press complaints from the public. This provides consistency for journalists in the application of press standards and for members of the public in knowing how and where to complain.

7. Through the work of the Complaints Committee, IPSO has considered how the Code applies specifically to the accuracy of poll reporting. The Committee’s decisions set out requirements for journalists to ensure the accuracy of their reporting and to correct inaccurate information promptly and with appropriate prominence.

Taking steps to ensure accuracy:

- General duty to report findings accurately

8. While it may be possible to interpret the findings of a poll in different ways, publications must be careful to present an interpretation that can be supported by the data. The press is entitled to condense research findings into succinct descriptions designed for consumption by a general audience ([03350-16](#) *In Facts v The Sun*). However, in doing so, care must be taken to report the findings accurately. This can include the requirement to “form a judgement on what those polled would have understood from the question, and to present a justifiable interpretation of the poll results” ([09324-15](#) *MEND v The Sun*). The press must therefore take care to present polling data in its proper context.

- Reporting basic information about methodology

9. An article in the press intended for a general audience may not include the level of detail that would be appropriate for a specialist publication. For this reason, we do not generally require our members to publish a detailed breakdown of a reported poll’s methodology ([07016-16](#) *McDonald v Daily Express*). Nonetheless, the press must take care not to mislead readers as to the context and source of polling data. For example, IPSO has previously ruled that it was significantly misleading to describe a poll about voting intentions as ‘independent’ in circumstances where it was carried out by a professional

polling body but commissioned by a political party ([03644-15](#) Nesbitt v Portadown Times).

Timely corrections of inaccurate reporting:

10. In circumstances where a publisher becomes aware that they have published a significant inaccuracy, the terms of the Code require them to issue a prompt and appropriately prominent correction and, where appropriate, an apology.
11. IPSO therefore takes into account offers to correct articles and give apologies, or the lack thereof, in its decision making. For example, the Complaints Committee can uphold a complaint and determine that the remedy required is that which was already offered or published by the publication in question ([13903-16](#) Versi v Mail Online; [13904-16](#) Versi v Daily Express). Equally a refusal to correct an article will be taken into account in assessing the seriousness of the breach and when requiring remedial action.
12. This provision seeks to strengthen and incentivise the effective use of publisher complaint procedures. It recognises that when publishers uphold high standards in complaints handling, they are demonstrating their accountability to their readership and transparency in their journalism.

Improving Reporting:

13. We believe that the Code is the most appropriate way to regulate reporting in this field and to deal with disputes when they arise. Members of the public and other interested parties are able to suggest changes to the Code during regular public consultations run by the Editors' Code Committee. This is the proper method by which standards of reporting within the press industry can be strengthened with input from the public. The production of a separate set of standards may make reporting and the resolution of disputes in this area overly complex, undermining the benefit of having a clear set of standards that covers the majority of the UK press.
14. This does not however preclude the production of specialist guidance on the reporting of opinion polls and/or statistics in general. Whilst not binding, such information can support best practice in new or complex areas of journalism. IPSO has, for example, produced guidance to help journalists comply with the Code with respect to the gathering of material published by individuals via social media. We have also supported other organisations in the production of reporting guidance. Whilst we have no immediate plans to produce specific Code-base guidance on the reporting of opinion polls, we will continue to monitor complaints and may develop such information in the future. We are also happy to support the development of broader guidance by other specialist bodies.
15. Training with respect to polling and use of statistics is also an important factor in improving press standards. We provide editorial training on general Code compliance, a large section of which focusses on Clause 1 (Accuracy). We also monitor the training provided by our members to their journalists. The [News UK](#) and [Associated Media](#) Groups

have, for example, informed us via their annual statements² that they arranged for journalists to attend training sessions with the Royal Statistical Society.

Conclusion:

- We do not support the creation of a separate Code of Conduct as the Editors' Code of Practice already sets the standard for accurate press reporting, the principles of which apply equally to the coverage of polling results.
- We would support the development of independent guidance for journalists reporting on polling data, as long as this did not conflict with, or cause confusion about, the application of the Code.
- We would support increasing the availability of training opportunities for journalists and believe this could have a beneficial impact on journalistic standards, particularly regarding the reporting of polling data.

Question 13: What impact is the increased use of digital media channels having on the way in which the public engages with political opinion polling? How is political opinion polling shared across social media platforms and what impact does social media have on the accuracy and reliability of political opinion polling?

16. Newspapers and magazines are increasingly engaging with their readers through digital and social media platforms. This activity can involve asking for readers' views on certain issues. These surveys can be very useful in gauging opinion within a publisher's readership. However, there are limitations to this sort of data collection, particularly when extrapolating the results to make UK-wide observations. The sample pool will already be limited to those who read the publication in question. Those who respond will also be self-selecting, and a call for views online may only attract particular sections of a publication's readership (i.e. those who engage with its social media and/or digital platforms).
17. It is therefore important for publications to properly outline the source of the data being reported. As already discussed, a full methodology is not generally necessary, but publications should be careful to distinguish between the results of professional, independent polls and self-selecting surveys directed at discrete audiences. Enough information should be provided to allow readers to form their own opinion about the validity of the data and interpretation being presented. In this regard, the primary concern is not necessarily the validity of the poll in question but the transparency with which it is reported.
18. For example, IPSO has required a front page correction in circumstances where the details of a phone survey, commissioned by the publication in question and limited to its readership, were not made sufficiently clear. In these circumstances, the article gave the impression that 'it was reporting the significant results of a representative poll carried out by a third-party for the publication' ([07016-16](#) McDonald v Daily Express).

² Our members are required to submit annual statements to us, setting out their compliance with the Editors' Code of Practice and details of any guidance and training they provide to their journalists.

Conclusion:

- Online surveys can be easy to run, but are susceptible to bias. Flaws in data collection methodology are not however unique to social media or digital surveys. News reporting must avoid misleading the public as to the strength or validity of reported data by distinguishing between professional polls and self-selecting surveys.